



Omani Political Relations With East Asia: China As A Model¹

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ABSTRACT

Oman stands as a distinguished civilization having established political and friendly relations with East Asian countries especially with the Chinese Empire for thousands of years. The bonds of friendship between Oman and China have endured from ancient times to the present era. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the historical Omani-Chinese political relations and avenues for their enhancement. The study's challenge lies in the extensive historical Omani-Chinese political ties that have persisted throughout history, yet have not received sufficient attention for exploration, clarification of details, and delineation of their features. The aim of this study is to delve into the Omani-Chinese political relations that began in an early period of history and continued into the modern era. The study employs a descriptive-historical methodology, analyzing historical sources and documents relevant to the topic. Research findings indicate that Chinese historical texts mention Oman's name for the first time in the year 97 CE during the Han Dynasty. Active communication between Oman and China persisted during the Islamic eras, with results showing that Abdullah bin Qasim served as an ambassador for the Imam Jafar bin Masood. These relations continued into the 5th Hijri century when Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sohari from Oman held responsibility for the foreign quarter in Canton. During the medieval ages, the study highlights that in the 14th century, the Chinese Empire dispatched a commercial fleet to engage with Oman, aiming to solidify trade connections. In contemporary times, the study emphasizes that Omani-Chinese relations have taken on a new dimension of friendly diplomatic ties. The study concludes by offering recommendations that can further foster the evolution and development of these relations.

Keywords: Omani; Political Relation; East Asia; China

INTRODUCTION

Oman has been one of the important hubs in international trade in the past. Historical evidence suggests that Oman's maritime project had its beginnings in the Neolithic era, as indicated by archaeological findings on the island of Masirah dating back to the 5th and 4th millennia BCE, where they used reed boats. Over time, Omanis began developing their ships to sail the high seas, utilizing their navigational expertise.

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They ventured into distant regions, such as [mention specific regions, e.g., China], which were some of the farthest areas from the ancient Near East. However, the Omanis managed to reach these areas during early historical periods, engaging in trade with civilizations that produced valuable goods like silk, porcelain, and ceramics. They also traded with other regions along the route to China, such as the Malay Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent, with its rich Indian and Sindhi civilizations.

Furthermore, the people of Oman have been involved in transit trade since that time, serving as well-known intermediaries between Eastern and Western civilizations. This was evident in the words of the Russian orientalist Andrei Scheglov, who stated, "The Omanis were the first nation to cross the waters of the Indian Ocean." Their trade activities extended to the northern regions of China, reaching cities like Qan-suwa and the land of Shilla, believed to be Korea, and even as far as the land of Waqwaq in the extreme east, likely Japan.

Arab traders, including Omanis from southern Arabia, engaged in maritime journeys to China through the Maritime Silk Road (known as the Incense Route) thousands of years ago. These Omani maritime expeditions became more active during the early Islamic periods. This is not surprising, as the Islamic faith encourages commerce and trade. Additionally, the fall of the Persian Empire under the influence of Islamic conquests, the expansion of Islamic rule into northern India, the demand for sophisticated Eastern goods in the Islamic market during the Abbasid Caliphate, and the establishment of security and stability in Islamic lands had a significant impact on the flourishing Omani trade with Asian coasts.

As one Chinese researcher noted, "Oman's shipbuilding technology was renowned in ancient times." Omani navigators, particularly from the Azd tribe, were pioneers in this field. It can be said that the history of relations between Oman and China, particularly between Oman and the Asian coasts in general, dates back to the emergence of ancient civilizations in India, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other regions, around the 4th millennium BCE. This research examines Omani-Chinese political relations from ancient historical periods to modern times.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a historical-analytical approach, where a comprehensive and theoretical description of Omani political diplomacy efforts in their engagement with the East, particularly the Chinese Empire, was provided. The study also highlighted the most important diagrams and maps, which serve as valuable indicators for analyzing and interpreting events. Consequently, this study has a fundamental qualitative form.

This type of study was chosen because the data collected focused solely on secondary data. Given the nature of the study and the collection of these secondary data, the method of concurrent map study was selected. This approach was chosen because the data collected for this study is inherently textual, such as letters, newspaper articles, and books. According to the methodology of this study in analyzing the data, the appropriate method used is content analysis. This includes the analysis of the included diagrams and accompanying maps. This approach is capable of providing an objective and systematic analysis of this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The historical relations between Oman and China date back to ancient times, primarily through trade exchanges between the two civilizations since prehistoric times. Omani-Chinese trade relations indeed began more than two thousand years ago, as historical sources indicate. Naturally, these trade relations led to higher-level connections, namely friendly political relations between the Omani government and the Chinese emperors. Both civilizations sought further economic ties and friendship to preserve the gains derived from bilateral trade between them.

China has been known for its natural silk production since ancient times and is credited with inventing papermaking. Starting from the era of Emperor Zhang Qian, Chinese merchants, along with their Arab, Persian, and Indian counterparts, traveled back and forth on the Silk Road, carrying silk, paper, and precious products from countries along this route. These interactions fostered bonds of friendship among these interconnected peoples. The 5th and 6th centuries CE, in particular, witnessed global popularity in the trade of frankincense and silk.

Trade relations between Oman and China thrived on various levels and across different time periods, encompassing maritime trade and key navigation routes between the two regions. One of the most significant maritime routes was known as the "Incense Route," extending from the southern shores of Oman (the Perfume Coast) to Chinese ports, passing through vital ports along the way, such as those in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

Since the early Islamic centuries, trade relations between Omani traders, in particular, and Muslim merchants in general, with China, have been active. This occurred during the rise of Islamic civilization in the Arabian Peninsula. Several factors contributed to this, including Islam's encouragement of work and missionary activities, the promotion of travel and human interaction, as well as the stability prevailing in Islamic lands during that period.

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) in China, there was a significant emphasis on trade, paving the way for commercial activity between China, Southeast Asia, and Oman. This prosperity is underscored by early Muslim explorers and geographers from the 4th century Hijri (10th century CE) onwards. They described the importance and status of Oman and its capital, Sohar, during that time. Sohar, in the early Islamic eras, was considered one of the most vital commercial centers and trading hubs in the entire Eastern Islamic region, renowned for its commercial flourishing. It served as a gateway to China and the primary port for trade during that period. Additionally, Sohar was crucial for ship repairs and provisioning.

Oman was indeed a significant player in the Indian Ocean trade equation for long historical periods. Omani sailors exported goods to the coasts of the Indian Ocean and its bays and gulfs. It is worth noting that without Oman's export of ivory to India and China, ivory's price would have been much lower in the Islamic lands. By the 2nd century Hijri (8th century CE), Omanis became the dominant maritime and trade force in the Indian Ocean, effectively transforming it into an Arabian sea teeming with their trade fleets, carrying goods between the East and the West.

The renowned Arab historian Abu al-Hasan al-Mas'udi, in his work "Meadows of Gold," highlighted Oman's significance during this period, describing it as "the China of the Arabs and its harbor." Oman served as a central hub for the exchange of goods between Oman, China, India, and Africa.

This historical background underscores the flourishing economic relations between Oman and China, particularly in maritime trade, which transformed the Indian Ocean into a vibrant avenue for trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

Stages of Omani-Chinese Political Relations

Omani-Chinese Political Relations Before Islam: It appears that Omani civilization, dating back to the 3rd millennium BCE, initially started as a trade-focused endeavor and later evolved into significant political relations with the Mesopotamian civilization, particularly due to the flourishing trade relations and geographical proximity. Concerning political relations with China, they also had an early start. Historical records indicate diplomatic exchanges and delegations between the two civilizations since the beginning of the Common Era. The first historical text mentioning Omani-Chinese political relations in the 1st century CE describes a Chinese delegation traveling westward towards the Arab lands. It states: "If you head west from Anxi (possibly India or Iran), you can reach the country of Oman after covering a distance of 3400 li." A li is a unit of distance measurement, approximately half a kilometer per li. Another Chinese envoy mentions, "They headed westward from Anxi (Kesh), covering a distance of 400 li until they reached Oman," in the year 97 CE. This suggests that political relations might have extended even further back in history, but the preserved texts indicate that these relations existed over 600 years before the Islamic period.

Two hundred years before the Islamic era, during the rule of the Omani Al-Julanda dynasty, the city of Dibba served as their economic and political capital, witnessing significant trade prosperity. A Chinese text by Li Yisai in the 4th century BCE mentions this scene, saying, "An annual market was held in Badānya in the Gulf region where Chinese goods were displayed." These historical texts confirm the deep-rooted and ancient nature of Omani foreign relations and their penetration into Chinese civilization, despite the vast geographical distance between them. Additionally, despite the relatively recent shipbuilding technology of that period, Omanis managed to establish advanced diplomatic relations.

One of the most famous Omani products during this period was frankincense, which held great importance. In 979 CE, Chinese Emperor Zhuangzong issued a decree stating that all frankincense, medicines, and other precious goods arriving at Chinese ports must be deposited in government storehouses and could only be sold through government channels. This decree underscores the Chinese government's interest in Omani strategic goods, particularly frankincense. Furthermore, the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) showed significant interest in foreign trade, laying the groundwork for commercial activity between China, Southeast Asia, and Oman.

Omani-Chinese Political Relations in the Early Islamic Period

In the Chinese Tang Dynasty records, it is mentioned that the first official envoy from Tashi to China was sent in the year 652 CE. Tashi here refers to the Arabian Peninsula. This date corresponds to the early period of the Rashidun Caliphate, during the reign of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan. Since Oman was part of the Islamic state and located on the primary trade route between the East and the Islamic world, with a flourishing maritime trade, it played a prominent role in these relations. Omani traders and diplomats carried their culture and practiced their religion freely and easily. They even established the first mosque in China, particularly in the city of Canton. To this day, this mosque stands as a testament to the arrival of Omanis in those regions. Some researchers also suggest that Omani traders who settled on the Chinese coast formed a community known as the "Tahir Mosque" or the "Tahir Mosque Community" in Guangzhou, which remains active to this day. Some Omani traders settled in this port, and some even married local residents, establishing a lasting presence.

Omani-Chinese trade relations also became popular among the people. Chinese annals indicate that the Chinese port of Canton was frequented by Omani traders traveling to and from it since the early Islamic

centuries. By the year 720 CE, the sight of Omani ships in those waters had become quite common. Omani merchants resumed trade activities, especially in silk and frankincense. The Chinese government even issued a decree in 1077 CE, strictly prohibiting the sale of foreign incense by foreigners to Chinese citizens. Oman excelled in trade, and Omanis actively engaged in commerce with the East, particularly Southeast Asia and China, dealing in various goods.

The emergence of the Islamic religion and the construction of the Abbasid capital in Baghdad contributed significantly to shifting trade routes from the Red Sea to the Arabian Gulf. Oman's ports and maritime activities thrived during this period. Additionally, the first and second Ibadi Imamates, from 132 to 280 AH, emphasized security, justice, and political, economic, and social stability, making Oman an independent political entity within the Islamic world. Notably, Imam Ghassan bin Abdullah (192-207 AH / 208-822 CE) played a significant role in countering pirate activities by building small, fast warships called "Shaza'at" to pursue and combat pirates who had been causing trouble in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea, even extending to the coasts of India. Imam Ghassan also established a defensive presence in Dama (currently Seeb) to combat piracy in the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea, all the way to the Indian coasts. During the rule of Imam Mahna bin Jaffer, the Omani fleet was further expanded and equipped with many ships. Even after the fall of the second Ibadi Imamate, Sur managed to maintain its commercial status. Historical evidence suggests that during the reign of Ahmed bin Hilal and under the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir, a major Omani merchant returning from India with a cargo of various goods was taxed with five hundred thousand dinars. When the Abbasid Caliph inquired about further taxes, the Omani ruler refused, fearing that this would lead to the disruption of trade with his country.

The Omanis played a prominent role in spreading Islam in various coastal regions of Asia. They reached India, the Malay Peninsula, the Chinese coastal regions, and even the far East, including China and Japan. The spread of Islam can be observed today in the places where Omani traders engaged in commerce and settled. These ports became centers for the conversion to Islam and its culture since the early 1st century AH. Historians mention that the beginning of Islam's spread in China dates back to the Tang Dynasty in the early 7th century CE. When Omani traders and diplomats ventured into these regions, they carried with them the trust of Islam through their good character, honesty, and kindness. Chinese records indicate the presence of a prominent Omani merchant and diplomat named Abu Ubaydah Abdullah bin al-Qasim, who arrived in China in 750 CE to purchase aloeswood, incense, and other aromatic materials. A prayer hall was inaugurated in his name in the city of Changle in Fujian province, China, to commemorate his role in spreading Islam in China. Many Chinese people converted to Islam under the influence of this Omani merchant, who was also a preacher and diplomat. This underscores Abu Ubaydah's status as one of the early Omani traders and diplomats who engaged in trade along the Chinese coast during this period. Some researchers even suggest that Abu Ubaydah was an envoy and ambassador from the Omani Imam Al-Julanda bin Mas'ud to the Chinese emperor. This aligns well with the historical events during which the first independent Omani state emerged, centered in Sohar, and actively engaged in diplomatic relations with various countries, especially in need of trade connections with a rich region in terms of food and industry.

One of the most famous Omani traders with significant relations with China was Abu Ubaydah Abdullah bin al-Qasim. He arrived in China in 750 CE to purchase aloeswood, incense, and agarwood. His impact on spreading Islam in China was so profound that a prayer hall was dedicated in his name in Changle, Fujian province, China. This testament to his role in disseminating Islam in China stands to this day. Abu Ubaydah's presence led to the conversion of numerous Chinese citizens to Islam due to his honorable character and good treatment. He is regarded as one of the earliest Omani traders and diplomats to engage in commerce along the Chinese coast during this period.

In conclusion, the early Islamic period witnessed robust Omani-Chinese political and trade relations. Oman played a crucial role in facilitating these exchanges due to its strategic location on the trade routes and its vibrant maritime trade. Omanis actively traded with China, Southeast Asia, and other regions, and their diplomatic efforts further deepened these connections. Omani merchants and diplomats also contributed to the spread of Islam in these regions, establishing a lasting cultural and religious presence.

Omani-Chinese Political Relations in Early Islamic Times

A text in the Chinese book "Tang" states, "The official sending of envoys from Tashi to China for the first time was in the year 652 CE." Here, Tashi refers to the Arabian Peninsula. This Gregorian date corresponds to the period of the rule of our master Uthman ibn Affan, during the era of the Rashidun Caliphate. Since Oman was part of the Islamic state and located on the main trade route from the East to the Islamic state, it was also the owner of commercial fleets. Oman was thus at the forefront of these relations. They brought with them their culture, freely practiced their religious rituals, and even established the first mosque in Canton, China. Some researchers also suggest the construction of Omani trading posts along the Chinese coasts, including the famous Tahir Mosque, which is still standing in Guangzhou. Many Omani traders settled in this port, some even living there for extended periods, marrying into the local community.

Omani-Chinese trade relations extended to a popular level. Chinese annals mention that the Chinese port of Canton was bustling with Omani traders coming and going since the early Islamic era. By the year 720 CE, sightings of these Omani ships were common in those waters. Trade in silk and incense was thriving, and the Chinese government even issued a statement prohibiting the sale of foreign incense to Chinese citizens in

1077 CE. Oman excelled in trade, and Omani traders actively engaged in trade with the East, contributing to its prosperity. The conditions in East Africa, the region north of the Arabian Gulf, and India made Oman a significant player in these trade routes. Chinese documents indicate that ships from the western Indian Ocean, particularly Oman, were seen in the port of Canton as early as 671 CE. The documents also suggest that Arabs replaced Persians in controlling the silk trade in the early 8th century CE. Omani merchants were active in trade with China and Southeast Asia in various commodities.

The emergence of Islam and the establishment of the Abbasid capital in Baghdad significantly impacted the trade routes, shifting the focus of trade from the Red Sea to the Arabian Gulf. This led to the flourishing of Omani ports and maritime activities. Additionally, the first and second Ibadi imamates from 132 to 280 AH were crucial in terms of security, justice, and political, economic, and social stability. During this period, Oman formed an independent political entity within the Islamic lands. Notably, Imam Ghassan ibn Abdallah (192-207 AH / 208-822 CE) played a crucial role. He defended the Omani coast against Indian and Persian pirates, patrolling the coasts of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, and even as far as the Indian coasts. During the Imamate of Imam Muhanna ibn Jafar, the Omani fleet was further developed and equipped with numerous ships. Even after the second Ibadi imamate fell, Sohar maintained its commercial significance. Historical records indicate that during the reign of Ahmed bin Hilal, the Omani ruler in the period of the powerful Abbasid Caliphate, a prominent Omani merchant returned from India with an abundance of goods. Ahmed bin Hilal collected a tax of five hundred thousand dinars from the port. However, when the Abbasid Caliphate requested further taxes, Ahmed bin Hilal refused, fearing the disruption of trade in his region. Oman's efforts and policies during the early Islamic period played a significant role in ensuring the security and stability of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Sea of Oman, as evidenced by Chinese historical records.

During the early Islamic era, the Omanis played a more significant role, thanks to their benevolent behavior and good dealings, in spreading Islam to various regions along the Asian coasts. Muslim merchants and preachers, including Omanis, reached India, Malaya, the Chinese Indian coasts, and even as far as China and Japan. Today, we can observe the presence of Islam in places where Omani traders engaged in trade and settled. These ports quickly converted to Islam and embraced its culture since the early 1st Islamic century. Historians note that the spread of Islam in China began during the Chinese Tang Dynasty in the 7th century CE. When Omani merchants embarked on their trade missions, they carried the responsibility of spreading Islam through their conduct, honesty, and trustworthiness. Historical documents show that the first Arab settlers in China came from the region of Sohar. They married Chinese women, and their descendants continue to serve the Chinese Muslim community to this day. In Southeast Asia, the beliefs and lives of the Malay people shifted from Buddhist traditions to Islamic ones due to the influence of Omani traders.

One of the most famous Omani diplomats and traders during the early Islamic era was Sheikh Abu Ubaidah al-Sagheer, who arrived in Canton in 133 AH. His journey is well-documented in Chinese records known as the "Chinese Annals," which provide significant evidence of Omani-Chinese political and trade relations. Abu Ubaidah Abdullah ibn al-Qasim al-Busaidi, the Omani, was one of the earliest individuals who promoted Islam in China at the beginning of the 2nd century AH. Some researchers suggest that Abu Ubaidah was an envoy and ambassador of the Omani Imam Jalanda ibn Mas'ud to the Chinese Emperor. This aligns with Omani historical events during which the first independent Omani state emerged, with Sohar as its capital. The appearance of the first Ibadi Omani Imamate encouraged the establishment of political relations with various countries, especially considering the need for trade connections with a region rich in food and industrial products.

One of the most prominent Omani traders who had special relations with China was Abu Ubaidah bin Abdullah bin al-Qasim. He arrived in China in the year 750 CE to buy aloeswood, aromatic woods, and agarwood. A prayer hall was opened in his name in the city of Zhangzhou in Fujian province, China, commemorating his role in spreading Islam in China. A significant number of Chinese people converted to Islam due to his good conduct and treatment. Thus, it can be said that the Omani mariner Abu Ubaidah Abdullah bin al-Qasim was one of the first Omani traders and preachers who engaged in trade along these coasts. He played a prominent role in spreading Islam to these regions.

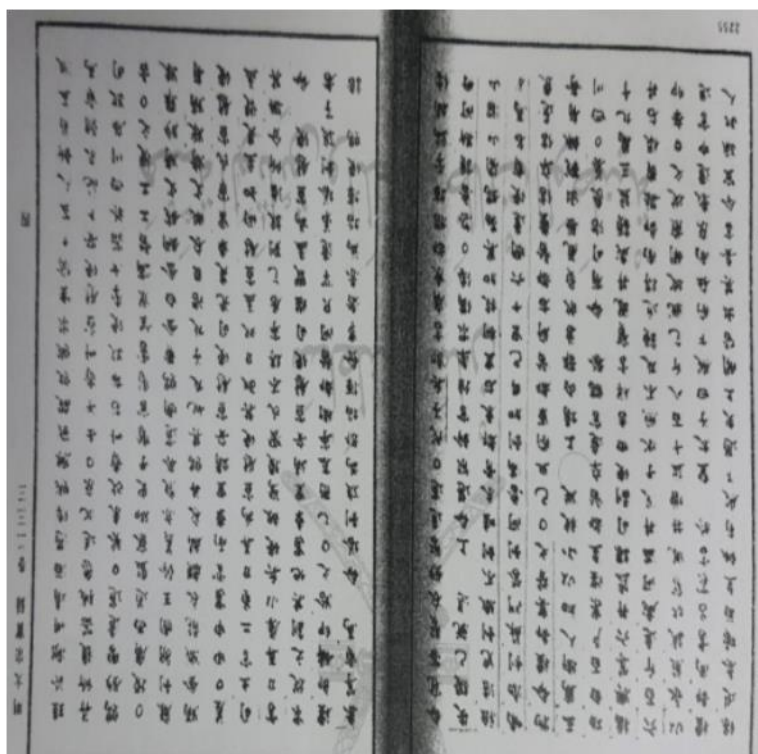
DATA ANALYSIS

After reviewing the historical maps and rare documents provided by Chinese publications, it can be asserted that the political relations between Oman and China throughout history have flourished significantly and notably



Map of Sea Routes Between East and West Passing Through The Sultanate of Oman

By examining the map provided, we can see that Omani ships set sail from ports such as Sohar, Muscat, Sur, Mirbat, Rasut, and Dhofar to Chinese ports like Canton, passing through the ports of the Indian subcontinent, the Malay Peninsula, and the Indonesian archipelago, crossing the South China Sea to reach the southern and eastern ports of China.



A Chinese document found within the Chinese annuals of history

By examining the document shown above, which is considered a record revealing the political interaction between Oman and China, it is evident that in the year 1421 CE, during the reign of the Chinese Emperor Yongle, an official Omani delegation arrived in his capital, the Chinese capital at that time. They brought with them a variety of commercial goods exported from the Omani region of Dhofar.

Omani Commercial Fleet Routes to China

Omani ships, along with other Arab vessels, would depart from the Arabian Gulf, traverse the Sea of Oman, and proceed to the Arabian Sea. They would transit through Sohar for trade purposes and then proceed to the port of Muscat for water resupply. Navigating alongside the Omani coast, they would advance to Ras Al-Hadd, and from there, they would head eastward.

Ships departing directly from the ports of Dhofar were referred to as "Tarih-mahiya" vessels. These were large and robust ships capable of navigating the high seas and oceans for long distances. They would cross the Indian Ocean to reach Kollam on the southwestern coast of India, then continue to the island of Serendib (Ceylon), and sail towards the Nicobar Islands across the Bay of Bengal. Subsequently, they would proceed to

Calicut on the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, then to the island of Tiwama (Sumatra), southwest of Malacca. From there, they would journey to Sanfolaat, and finally, set anchor at the grand Chinese port of Khanfu (modern-day Canton).

It is worth noting that Zark bin Shahriar (4th century AH) mentions that the navigator Muhammad bin Balshad bin Haram would embark on this route from the Malay Peninsula, sailing towards the port of Risut. He would then follow the Bukhur route for his other journeys, departing from Dhofar and heading westward through Yemen. From there, the route branched into two: overland and maritime.

The overland Bukhur route ascended towards Najran, crossing the Hijaz to reach Gaza and subsequently Europe. Meanwhile, the maritime route ascended to the Red Sea and continued through Egypt and the Mediterranean Basin before reaching Europe. Additionally, there was another overland route departing from Dhofar to reach Najd and Iraq.

These were the historical maritime trade routes utilized by Omani fleets on their journeys to China.

CONCLUSION

On the land of Oman, an ancient civilization once thrived, enduring through the ages. Blessed with a unique geographical location and significant human activity, this civilization propelled progress and prosperity. Its exceptional position facilitated extensive trade relationships, encouraging its rulers to establish bonds of friendship and goodwill with many regions. Among these relationships, Omani-Chinese trade and political ties stood as a prime example of friendship and peace. These amicable relations have endured since ancient times, spanning the Middle Ages and persisting into the modern era. They continue to underpin the contemporary Omani-Chinese political landscape, and it is anticipated that they will be further strengthened in the future.

It comes as no surprise, for Oman is renowned for its generosity, peace, and harmony. Today, it stands as a nation recognized globally for its commitment to peace, friendship, and love. During the reign of Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970-2020) and currently under the leadership of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the Omani government has placed significant emphasis on nurturing and strengthening Omani-Chinese friendship. This commitment has positively impacted the growth of trade exchange and investment presence between these two friendly nations.

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